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The cover depicts the gentle gaze of AI on our precious earth within the cosmic background

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Editorial

Meaning in and of the Galaxy

Humans might be the only intelligent beings in our galaxy, so destroying our civilisation could be a galactic disaster, Prof Brian Cox has warned leaders in the run-up to Cop26, the 26th United Nations Climate Change conference. It is scheduled to be held in the city of Glasgow, Scotland, between 31 October and 12 November 2021. Prof Cox is an English physicist and former musician who serves as professor of particle physics in the School of Physics and Astronomy at the University of Manchester. He is also working at CERN as a physicist (APS, 2021).

He went on to say that if the planet were to perish, the galaxy would lose its purpose. The unique events that lead to the birth of human existence and civilisation may mean that its extinction will ‘eradicate meaning in the cosmos for all time.’

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The physicist and presenter, speaking at the launch of his new BBC Two Series *Universe*, said that after speaking with the scientists who advised the show from around the world, he believes that humans and sentient life on Earth “might be a remarkable, naturally occurring phenomenon” that “world leaders might need to know.”

Cox delves into the “Goldilocks” theory, which claims that our planet’s position in respect to the Sun, as well as the unique circumstances that formed Earth over billions of years, made it “just perfect” for significant life to emerge and evolve.

In *Universe*, Cox delves into the “Goldilocks” theory, which claims that our planet’s position in respect to the Sun, as well as the unique circumstances that formed Earth over billions of years, made it “just perfect” for significant life to emerge and evolve.

“We’ve discovered – and I believe this is a realistic working assumption – that there are relatively few civilisations per galaxy,” Cox added. “I think sometimes that viewpoint is vital,” Cox remarked when asked how crucial that discovery was for politicians dealing with the climate catastrophe.

“I would suggest that if our civilisation does not persist, for whatever reason, and that reason may be an external occurrence or our own action, nuclear war, or whatever we decide to inflict on ourselves, whomever presses that button has the potential to erase meaning in a galaxy for all time.” He added: “And I believe that’s something that world leaders should be aware of.” It’s possible that it’ll be a significant act” (Conlan, 2021).

“The more I learn about biology, the more astonished I am that we exist at all,” he continued, adding that while astronomers estimated that there were about 20 billion Earth-like planets in the Milky Way galaxy, “so we might expect life to be everywhere,” “almost every biologist I speak to says, ‘Yes, but it will be slime at best.’ We live in a violent cosmos, so the idea of planets that are stable enough to support an uninterrupted cycle of life could be limiting.”

“There are very few areas where atoms can think,” Cox added. Because “meaning exists only in our thoughts,” the extinction of Earth may result in the extinction of meaning.

“If you believe that meaning comes from sufficiently complicated biological machines, then the only place those machines could exist is here; it’s true to say that we’d live in a meaningless galaxy if this planet didn’t exist.” That’s not how life works. There is a distinction between living and living intelligently” (Conlan, 2021).

He also mentioned a concept known as the “great filter,” which suggests that “civilisations don’t last long.” It’s possible that the difficulties of industrializing a civilisation are too severe, and that our wisdom lags behind our knowledge or capabilities, leaving us unable to handle the transition to a space-faring civilisation.

“Climate change is also a problem... Civilisations encounter numerous hurdles as they gain knowledge and competence, and it’s possible that civilisations have a natural lifespan.” As conscious beings, we are in a privilege position to extend this lifespan.

In Universe, Cox – who was part of the band D:Ream, which created the optimistic anthem Things Can Only Get Better –

explains how stars are not immortal and one day the universe will return to darkness (Wikipedia contributors, 2021).

He said some of his ad-libs during Universe were more philosophical and “religious than I intended” than in his previous series, and that was because he wanted to explore why we cared about stars and the part they played in creating life.

As far as we know we are the only meaning making and meaning needing creatures. That is great. It is our greatest honour to preserve this meaning and to make it more relevant for our future generations.

In the first episode he calls the stars “mortal gods” and, watching a sunrise, says: “If you’re looking for gods, you don’t need to look any further, because these are the real things.”

We need to agree to Prof Cox’s definition of gods. But we can surely agree to his understanding of meaning in and of the galaxies. As far as we know we are the only

meaning making and meaning needing creatures. That is great. It is our greatest honour to preserve this meaning and to make it more relevant for our future generations. We do have that inner creativity and nobility to foster life, in spite of the danger that exist.

Most of the article in this issue focus on the need for global answers to global problems that we human being face collectively. We begin with a critique of Kant’s enlightenment and move on to long-term solutions that the world needs badly. Then we talk of the need for effective

communication to solve the problems we face, especially in terms of globalisation and progress. Then we refer to the need to understand nationalism in a global perspective.

Solving our problems globally, it is hoped, will further the meaning that we possess as human beings and will give meaning to the universe itself!

The Editor

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